



RURAL EDUCATION MATTERS

"Enriching Our Kids, Preserving Our Community"

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Good Morning/Afternoon,

My name is Jennifer Jarosz and I live in St. Helen, Michigan, a small rural community between Houghton Lake and Roscommon in Roscommon County. I am here today representing a non-profit organization called Rural Education Matters (REM) that was formed for the single purpose of creating a charter school in St. Helen, Michigan.

REM exists because of a decision by the Roscommon Areas Public School District to consolidate St. Helen's elementary school with the Roscommon Elementary school which is located approximately 15 miles away. This left our community without a school and a bus ride for kindergarteners through 12th grade students of over an hour back and forth to school. This consolidation has caused a number of what we think are serious problems, not the least of which is an overcrowded elementary school with over 500 students. You should also know that the Roscommon Middle school did not make AYP and the Roscommon High School only 7% of its students were identified as being career and college ready. All of these factors are unacceptable, and our children deserve MORE!

Just to provide you with an understanding of our situation, about 50% of St Helen children live below poverty levels. Median house values are below state average, the unemployed percentage is above state average at 12%, the number of current college students is below state average and the percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher is significantly below state average. Our community is surrounded by two school districts with an average graduation rate of less than 75%. Educationally, we are already an under-served community and it is only going to get worse if we are not provided some opportunities for educational alternatives.

The school we have planned to open is called the Charlton Heston Academy named after our most famous former resident. We will offer parents a superior educational choice. We understand the desire parents to provide their children with the same opportunities offered in urban and suburban areas. It is our plan to not only encourage college classes through dual enrollment, but make sure each student is given the opportunity to do so. This is possible through a partnership with Kirtland Community College which is located just eight miles from St. Helen. Understanding every student is not "college bound" the Academy is also looking at educational programs geared towards those students with entrepreneurship energies and interests. Students starting at the middle school grades will learn how to do business plans, present them to a bank and apply money granted towards a business they will create and develop. Green technologies will also be implemented bringing the classrooms outside, an example we seen put to work with our partnering school Chatfield School in Lapeer County, called No Child Left Inside Initiative. Children will learn mathematics, English, science, and social studies in a variety of settings which is especially important for students with different learning styles. And while all of those things are our primary focus, we will also provide us with a school that can once again be the center of our community. We were able to develop and refine these plans with a Charter School planning grant provided by the Michigan Department of Education. Incidentally, our application to MDE received the highest score ever awarded as of that date. We are thankful to all of the technical assistance providers who have seen our situation and were willing to contribute to our success. But we are not done yet.

Along our journey we have encountered a number of significant but not insurmountable obstacles including the fact that there is no public funding available to groups looking to purchase existing school buildings nor invest in new construction, without a prior history or “track record”. Meanwhile our community has an empty school building that sits vacant, at the expense of tax payers. In fact, the Roscommon School District spent money to obtain the land the building sat on after they had already decided to close the school. The school district is still looking to contract with a realtor to sell the building, two years after the announcement of its closure. Unfortunately, they have made it clear that they would not sell it to us.

We are here today because for the last two years our development team has provided applications to Central Michigan University, Ferris State University, Grand Valley State University, Saginaw Valley State University, Lake Superior State University, Northern Michigan University, Kirtland Community College and Roscommon Area Public School District. None of them were advanced, except Grand Valley State University, who subsequently withdrew their acceptance due to a lack of charters to give.

Our development team has also made presentations to our local school authorities: Kirtland Community College’s President and Board of Trustees, Roscommon Area Public School District board, Houghton Lake Community Schools Superintendent, C.O.O.R. Intermediate School Districts President. Unfortunately, because of politics and a fear of alienating their neighbors who might be represented by adult-centered special interest groups, the local elected boards have refused to consider our applications.

The creation and opening of CHA is more than just providing an educational opportunity to students residing in a rural environment. The community of St. Helen views their school as the linchpin to their community. Numerous residents have stated that the lack of an elementary school in St. Helen would lead to the eventual death of the community. A community cannot survive without quality education opportunities as young adults with children are likely to reside elsewhere and no community can grow without the retention of its young families.

Since the initial application, individuals familiar with the charter school movement in Michigan have expressed an overwhelming amount of support for REM in their pursuit of a school for St. Helen. This includes representatives from the National Charter School Institute, the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, and the Department of Education. Our group has even received feedback from university authorizers to the effect that the authorizers stated that they wished they had a charter to give. Our local Township Board, the Chamber of Commerce, members of the Roscommon County Commissioners, and Richfield Township public safety department have endorsed us and are supporting our efforts.

Simply put, our development team’s efforts in pursuit of a charter have not been spoiled by one or two denials. We are committed to success, because the life of the St. Helen community and children depends on it. Failure to bring a public school to St. Helen is not an option and the core group here with me today are willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen. We ask that you allow more opportunity’s to create high quality public school choices, lift the cap, and give parents the responsibility to decide what type of education will best for their child to achieve and succeed.

Thank you.

Jennifer Jarosz, President
Rural Education Matters